

SAFE SCHOOLS & SPRING TIME POST-9/11/01:

Prevention Issues

By Dr. Scott Poland

The spring semester has been marred in recent years by tragic shootings in several of our nation's public schools. Communities that immediately come to mind are Jonesboro AK, Springfield OR, Littleton CO, Lake Worth FL, Santee and El Cajon CA. School personnel have questioned why so many tragedies have occurred during this particular time of the school year. A set of constant factors and pressures on students have historically resulted in increased threats of violence and behavior problems each spring, and they include:

- Frustrations from the long school year.
- Anticipation/transition issues for summer vacation and changing relationships with graduation or move to a new school.
- Failing grades and recognition of the reality of repeating the same grade.
- Pressure of semester exams.
- Awareness of anniversary dates of highly publicized school shootings that occurred in the spring, anniversary of Hitler's birthday, Oklahoma City bombing, the Branch Davidian fire in Waco.
- High stakes testing assessment, mandatory retention, and possible denial of a high school diploma.

As a result of the 9/11/01 attack on our nation, students will face added stresses during the 2002 spring semester:

- Continuing war on terrorism.
- Increasing racial and religious tensions especially directed toward Arab-Americans and members of the Islamic faith.
- Hundreds of thousands of U.S. military personnel with immediate and extended families who have been affected by troop deployment.
- Thousands of residents of New York and Washington D.C. who were exposed to the traumatic aftermath of violence.
- Thousands of Americans who lost loved ones, friends or acquaintances on 9/11/01.
- Financial recession in our country.

Positive national responses in the aftermath of 9/11/01 include increased patriotism and strong support of our military and national leaders. Many students and families have spent more time together and have experienced family renewal. Americans of all ages, especially students, have participated in a variety of positive projects and donations in support of those directly affected by 9/11/01. Another positive development has been increased awareness of the importance of mental health services and especially the importance of stress management.

There are lessons to be learned from past tragedies such as Hurricane Andrew and the Oklahoma City bombing. Research findings indicate that during the period from six to eighteen months following each tragedy, an increased frequency of mental health and family difficulties surfaced in those who were affected by the traumas. Following these and other tragedies, there were a number of suicides by both adults and children. It is important that school administrators not underestimate either the initial or long-term impact of a crisis on students as well as staff members. Traumatized adolescents in particular have shown increased reckless behavior, substance abuse, depression and suicidal behavior. Following a tragedy, children of all ages are fearful of the future, regress behaviorally and/or academically and often experience sleeping difficulties. Student behaviors and school safety concerns that may surface this spring are:

- Increased bullying.
- Lack of tolerance of diversity.
- Increased threats of violence.
- Increased misbehavior.
- Increased self-mutilation.
- Increased suicidal behavior.
- Increased bomb threats.

Any student who is experiencing fears is a student who is not learning. To maximize student achievement and success this spring, it is imperative that schools provide an environment where students feel they are safe.

Conclusions in the recent U.S. Secret Service report on targeted school violence are:

- There is no definite profile of previous student shooters, as they varied in race, ethnicity, family background and level of school success.
- Almost all of the perpetrators told someone about their plans to commit an act of violence.
- Revenge was the primary motive.
- Two-thirds of the perpetrators were suicidal and were the victims of bullying.

Key recommendations for school administrators are:

- Develop threat assessment procedures.
- Create safety task forces that include students.
- Building positive faculty/student relations with the goal that students view adults as trustworthy and caring.
- Develop policies and programs to reduce bullying.
- Personalize massive schools and help instill in students a sense of belonging.
- Provide classroom discussions on safety and tolerance.
- Develop and/or clarify procedures to prevent youth suicide.
- Adults should model tolerance of diversity, and school and community leaders of different races and religions must collaborate and unite.

We would all like to conclude that the war on terrorism is almost over, but that is clearly not the case, and our military is still engaged in large-scale assaults. It is recommended that school administrators pay careful attention to the climate in their schools this spring. Increased visibility of school personnel in hallways, lunchrooms, etc. during changing periods and before and after school is recommended. In addition, school newspapers and other student publications should be reviewed carefully for prejudicial or critical comments about our nation's citizens and leaders.

School safety is an inside job that requires a commitment first from the student body and then from the faculty, parents and community. Two practical examples to get that commitment from students are:

- Conduct leadership meetings where the principal or superintendent meets with a variety of student leaders to discuss key issues.
- Have all students and their parents sign a safety contract that includes a commitment to manage anger, be tolerant of others, reduce bullying, and report threats of violence to adults at school.

Many parents have been especially fearful and concerned about school safety this year. Parents should be included in safety planning activities and should be given clear comprehensive information should safety concerns arise.

No one wants to make a prediction about future tragedy, but this is certainly a time for adults to increase supervision of children and students and to have many meaningful dialogues. Mental health services and wellness programs in our schools have never been more important than during this school year. It is important that school administrators review these important issues and their crisis plans with their staff and coordinate closely with school and local police. It is my fervent hope that every school in America will have a safe conclusion of the 2001-2002 academic year.

Dr. Poland will present an all day workshop at this year's Annual Nebraska Conference for Preventing Youth Violence to be held June 20, 2002 at the Embassy Suites Hotel, Lincoln Nebraska. Call (402) 471-8306 for additional information.

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